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AUTHOR Tompkins, Stephen R.
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ABSTRACT

A speed reading/scholarship skills course was offered to college-bound students in the Dallas, Texas, school system in 1977-78. Approximately 1,700 students took the 60-day elective course in 20 different high schools. As measured by the Nelson-Denny Standardized Reading Test and compared to college freshman norms, students registered the following gains: over one year in vocabulary; one year, five months in comprehension; and four years, seven months in reading speed. The course has three areas of emphasis: reading efficiency, as measured by increased speed and comprehension; study efficiency; and college efficiency. A follow-up questionnaire mailed to students upon whom the course had been field tested, after they had spent one year in college, indicated that students had retained and used many of the skills they had been taught in the course. (MKM)

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Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills for Gifted High School Students

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by

Stephen R. Tompkins
Dallas Independent School District
School Administration Building
3700 Ross Ave.
Box 112
Dallas, Texas
75204

CS205296

Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills for
Gifted High School Students
by Stephen R. Tompkins

For the past several years much emphasis has been placed on the needs of the remedial reading student at the high school level. This was and continues to be an area of needed attention. The balanced reading/language arts program of any school system should include appropriate strategies and programs for these students. Likewise a truly balanced reading/language arts program needs to make allowance for the developing reading and study-learning skill needs of students at the other end of the educational spectrum - those who read at or above their grade level, the 'serious' student, the academically gifted, the probable college-bound, the highly motivated.

The development and implementation of such a course in order to create such a well balanced curriculum was the assignment given by Dr. Alvin Granowsky when he became the Director of Reading/Language Arts for the Dallas School System in the Fall of 1976. Within a year, the course, titled Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills, had been designed, field-tested, publicized in the schools, teachers trained and materials ordered. During the 1977-78 school year, approximately 1,700 students took the 60 day elective course in 20 different high schools. As measured by the Nelson-Denny Standardized Reading Test and compared to college freshman norms, students registered the following gains:

+ 1 year, 3 months in vocabulary,

+ 1 year, five months in comprehension,

+ 4 years, 7 months in reading speed.

Students' average reading speed increase was 387 words per minute, or 141%.[1]

Extensive research was conducted in the planning of the course to determine the most practical and cost effective plan of action. First, the possibilities of utilizing a professstional speed reading company were investigated. Whereas results would have been guaranteed by this company, the number of students served by such a program would have been limited and the cost per student was prohibitive.

The second major resource investigated was the reading improvement courses offered at the Dallas County Community Colleges. The format of these courses, a diagnostic-prescriptive approach, was the one ultimately adopted. In addition to its cost effectiveness and emphasis on individualization, the philosophy and scope and sequence of these courses paralled the overall objectives of the reading/language arts curriculum in Dallas.

Essentially the program is a speed reading/learning course for 11th and 12th grade students who read at or above their grade level. There is nothing new about the concept of offering such a developmental course. Four Dallas high schools were offering a "Reading Improvement" course intended for this student population. However, it was felt that for such a course to reach its potential, there needed to be a coordinated, systematic effort starting at the Central Administrative level. Another problem with the Reading Improvement course was simply the name. Students seemed to view the course as a remedial one just because of the course title. Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills just sounded more sophisticated than Reading Improvement!

"Speed Reading"

The speed reading course, as compiled and written, has three areas of emphasis: reading efficiency, study efficiency and college efficiency. Reading efficiency includes the stated objective of increasing reading speed by at least 100% while achieving equal or better comprehension. Is the teaching of quick reading techniques really needed? College educators have known for a long time that many students who otherwise have the ability to do college level work, fail because of inefficient reading habits.[2] College students read at an average rate of 300 words per minute.[3] A full year of reading in a literature class consisting of five medium length novels (330 pages each, 300 words per page) would necessitate a total of 90 hours more work from the slowest readers than from students who average about 400 words per minute.[4] The "printed knowledge" explosion experienced in the United States since 1940 has seen newspaper circulation increase by 45%, magazine circulation increase by 110% and technical papers increase to an estimated 60 million pages. Top executives average over 4 hours of daily reading in their attempt to keep pace.[5] One may conclude that the amount of reading is constantly on the increase. The only thing that does not increase is the time in which to get it done. This, then, is the rational for speed reading instruction.

After pretesting to determine beginning reading efficiency levels, teacher directed lessons are given in the following areas: 1) developing a positive attitude toward the act of reading, 2) the importance of individual perception and background experiences in the act of reading, 3) the need to establish a purpose for reading and adjust one's reading speed to that purpose, 4) the speed reading technique of using the hand or a pencil or a finger as a pacer while reading and 5) the Survey,

Question, Read, Review, Recite (S. Q. 3. R.) study approach to reading as the technique to pull these components together in the attempt to modify students' "old style" reading habits. Students are then placed into learning contracts where they practice these skills. Course materials (purchased by each school at a cost of approximately $600 per school) include a variety of books with speed reading drills and specific reading skill improvement items (getting the main idea, making inferences, vocabulary development, etc.)

The second major area of emphasis in the course is study efficiency. Schools may prepare students very well academically for college. However, students are not always prepared for the change in life style that occurs. For years students are told where to go, when to go there and where to sit when they get there. Suddenly they arrive at college where a person's education is his/her own responsibility. There is a lot of freedom, a lot of independence in college. There are many distractions. For every ten students who enter college, three will drop out during the first year. Two more will drop out during the second year.[6] Freshmen in particular complain that some professors, anxious to demonstrate the difference between high school and college, give very low grades and pile on reading assignments.[7] Research shows that if study habits are poor, a student will most likely withdraw because of poor scholastic performance.[8] To address this problem, a variety of study/learning skills are taught in Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills. These include: critical listening skills, taking lecture notes, underlining a text, college library usage, writing a critical analysis, memory improvement and test taking skills. The sequencing of the course calls for the teaching of these skills to

be interspersed with the students' contract work to vary the routine.

The "how to" of the teaching of these study skills is left to the discretion of the individual teacher. However, realizing the majority of the twenty English teachers chosen to teach the course probably had no formal training in speed reading or study skill instruction, suggested teacher lessons and accompanying materials were prepared and furnished to each teacher. Critical listening skills, for example, are taught via taped lessons which help enable students to identify what is most important in a teacher lecture and what might be less important. The lesson on "Taking Lecture Notes" includes some common sense suggestions such as always sitting on the front row in a lecture class in order to see and hear better, not hesitating to ask questions, not allowing oneself to become distracted by an instructor's dialect, accent or mannerisms, taping lectures to supplement one's notes and reviewing one's notes as soon as possible after the lecture. Test taking hints include appropriate allotment of time for different parts of a test, determining if there is a penalty factor for guessing, answering the easy items first to gain confidence and reduce test anxiety, knowing test language (define, compare, contrast, trace, etc.), and having knowledge of absolute words in test questions, such as 'always,' 'never,' 'each,' 'every,' etc. After teacher lessons on these various study skill topics, student follow-up is made through in-class reading of study skill books, in-class practice and outside of class assignments.

The final area of emphasis in the course, college efficiency, includes teacher led discussions on the following topics: choosing a college, enrollment and registration procedures, counseling resources,

choosing instructors, teaching style vs. learning style, degree requirements and college course options. The intent of these lessons is to give students an overview of "what it's like" in college so that they might be able to make more intelligent decisions when faced with new situations.

A proof of the success of any course or program is whether or not students actually use the skills they have been taught, if they remember and apply what they "learned" in the classroom. To find out if Speed Reading/Scholarship Skills had long term effectiveness, a follow-up questionnaire was mailed to students upon whom the course was field tested, after they had spent one year in college. Students responding to the survey stated that, overall, they retained and used 60% of all the skills they had been taught in the course. Or as one of the former students in the course put it, "Thanks for the help. I'm making better grades in college than I did in high school. I really appreciated the fact someone cared enough about college-bound students to initiate this extremely beneficial course."

FOOTNOTES

1 Tutoring Services Department, Dallas Independent School District, Spring, 1978.

2 Arthur Heilman, Nation, Vol. 193 (December 9, 1961), p. 468.

3 Changing Times, Vol. 15 (July, 1961), p. 12.

4 James A. Grob, "Reading Rate and Study - Time Demands on Secondary Students," Journal of Reading, Vol. 13 (January, 1970), p. 286.

5 James I. Brown, "Quick Reading," Look, Vol. 34 (January 7, 1970), p. 71.

6 Carol F. Creedon and Timothy J. Pantages, "Studies of College Attrition: 1950-1975," Review of Educational Research, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Winter, 1978), p. 51.

7 Bernard Bard, "College Students: Why They Drop Out," Education Digest, Vol.34 (March, 1969), p. 19.

8 Creedon, Review of Educational Research, p. 49.